

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part __)

The Founding of Yeshiva Etz Chaim

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*Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **Jewish Education in New York City**, by Alexander M. Dushkin, The Bureau of Jewish Education, New York, 1918*

Between 1881 and 1924 approximately two million Jews immigrated to the United States, primarily from Eastern Europe and Russia. The great majority of them came as a result of the intensified Russian pogroms following the vicious discriminatory May Laws of 1881. Another factor was the belief that America was “Die goldene medina” - the golden country, where economic opportunities were endless.

In addition to the formidable challenge of earning a livelihood, these immigrants soon found that there were few established religious institutions where their children could receive a decent Jewish education. This vacuum was initially filled by the Cheder and the Talmud Torah.

The Cheder more often than not was run as private enterprise. Any person, qualified or not, who wished to supplement his income could open a school without hindrance. In short, while there certainly were Chadarim run by devoted and qualified teachers, there were many others in which the level of teaching was substandard at best. The result was that the Cheder experience for many boys not only did not give them a basic knowledge of Judaism, but, instead left them with a very negative attitude towards the religion of their parents.

The Talmud Torah was, in contrast to the Cheder, a communal school under the direction of a Board of Directors. One of the best known of these was the Machzike Talmud Torah, which was reorganized in 1883. For a long time it was the pride of the Eastern European Jews who resided on the Lower East Side.

The instruction during this period [1883 – 1902] was carried on daily from 4 to 8 o'clock every afternoon of the week except Fridays, also from 2 to 5 on Saturdays, and from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Sundays. Besides the afternoon classes, there were “day” classes, from 9 to 12 every morning, for young children below public school age. These classes were for the purpose of teaching young children the elements of Hebrew reading and some of the prayers.

The curriculum of the Talmud Torah during this period was as follows: (a) reading of Hebrew, beginning from A B C up to fluent reading, in accordance

with the rules of Hebrew grammar; (b) holy Scriptures and grammar; (c) benedictions and prayers, and translation of same; (f) meaning of holidays; (g) reading of the portion of the week (in the Bible) and the Haftorah (prophetic portion), according to the accentual marks and notes, also the benedictions pertaining thereto; (h) Shulchan Aruch and Orach Chayim; (i) decrees of the Jewish faith, and Jewish history.(Pages 71- 72)

It is interesting to note that in 1892, shortly after becoming a director of the Machzike Talmud Torah, Harry Fischel¹ proposed to the Board of Directors a school for girls be opened under the direction of a young woman who had recently arrived from Eretz Yisroel. This was considered a revolutionary idea in 1892, and was bitterly opposed by some.

One must keep in mind that in the nineteenth century formal Jewish education for girls was virtually unknown throughout the world, except for a few schools in Germany modeled after the *Realschule* founded by Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch shortly after his arrival in Frankfurt in 1851. In spite of the opposition, Mr. Fischel prevailed. The result was that within a year the school had more applications from the parents of girls between the ages of 10 and 12 than it could accommodate.

Some Parents Want More

But the Talmud Torah was not sufficient for the demands of some of the Eastern European Jews, because it failed to make proper provision for the study of the Talmud. Talmud had formed a very important element in their Jewish curriculum, in many cases the only element. It stressed the development of the “intellect,” and this intellectual ideal the Jews from Eastern Europe retained here also. Because the shorter time at the disposal of the Talmud Torah made it very difficult to meet this demand for instruction in Talmud, except to a limited extent, the most orthodox of the Eastern European Jews began to turn their attention to the third of their educational institutions, the Yeshibah. (Page 72)

The result was that in 1886 Yeshiva Etz Chaim was incorporated as The Etz Chaim Talmudical Academy. The school was an intermediate Talmud Cheder, rather than an elementary school, and was modeled after its European counterparts.

The early days of the institution are well characterized in the words of one of its founders, who is still connected with the institution. “A few of us Jews wanted that the Machzike Talmud Torah should teach Talmud, but they refused to do so. And so we went out into the street and picked up some boys, nine and ten years old, who knew the Bible with Rashi from ‘home,’ and began to teach them Talmud. We rented a room at 47 East Broadway. But our financial condition was so poor that we had no money with which to buy books. So we bought one Gemarah (Talmud) for 90 cents, and tore it into three parts, giving one part to each of the three Melammedim (teachers). To start our Yeshibah, the directors went about the neighborhood collecting nickels and dimes, which were given to

us. In order to maintain the Yeshibah, the directors had to post up boxes in private homes and in synagogues, and then go personally to collect the money which good people deposited in them for our Yeshibah.”

The aim of the institution was “to give instruction to poor Hebrew children in the Hebrew language and the Jewish religion —Talmud, Bible and Shulchan Aruch, during the whole day from 9:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon; also from 4:00 in the afternoon two hours shall be devoted to teaching the native language, English, and one hour to teaching Hebrew, Loschon Hakodesh, (holy language), and to read and write Jargon (Yiddish).” (Pages 73 - 74)

From the amount of time allocated to secular subjects, it is clear that the directors of the yeshiva considered these far less important than the students’ *Limudei Kodesh* studies. Abraham Cahan, who would eventually become the editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward* and a prominent figure in the Socialist movement in America, became one of the first teachers in the English Department in 1887.

Cahan records that the curriculum was loosely drawn to provide for the study of grammar, arithmetic, reading, and spelling—all within the “English Department.” But because the directors of the school had no clear idea of what should be taught, the English Department functioned haphazardly, more out of a perfunctory acknowledgement for these subjects than a sincere desire to “provide the children with a modern education.”

The English Department was divided into two classes. The first was taught by a boy about fourteen, who had just graduated from public school and the second was taught by Cahan, who was a little less than twenty-eight years old. The students ranged from the ages of nine or ten to fifteen and many were exposed to the formal study of secular subjects for the first time. One of the native students received his first lessons in the English language when he entered the Yeshiva after passing his thirteenth birthday.

The young immigrants presented an immense challenge to their devoted teachers. The students drank up the instruction with a thirst centuries old. Cahan frequently remained long after the prescribed teaching hours to tutor his pupils, who were uniformly poor in reading and mathematics and who regarded grammar as an exquisite form of torture. On these occasions, the directors would ask Cahan why he “worked so hard,” saying that the students “already knew enough English.”

In 1912 Yeshiva Etz Chaim and the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) merged. Etz Chaim became a preparatory school for RIETS. “In this way a self-contained and integrated Jewish educational unit, ranging through the highest level of Talmudic scholarship, was established for the first time on American soil.”²

¹ For information about the life of Harry Fischel, see the Jewish Press articles "[The Multimillionaire Who Remained True to Orthodoxy](#) **The Jewish Press**, April 18, 2006, page 1, "[Harry Fischel \(1865 - 1948\) Orthodox Jewish Philanthropist Par Excellence - I](#)" **The Jewish Press**, May 3, 2006, page 36. Glimpses into American Jewish History Part 14, and "[Harry Fischel \(1865 - 1948\) Orthodox Jewish Philanthropist Par Excellence - II](#)" **The Jewish Press**, June 2, 2006, page 70. Glimpses into American Jewish History Part 15.

² **The Story of Yeshiva University, The First Jewish University in America**, by Gilbert Klaperman, The Macmillian Company, Collier – Macmillian Limited, London, 1969, page 131.